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When the grass is greener: fertility decisions in a cross-national context

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Abstract: In research and policy discourse, conceptualizations of fertility decision-making often assume that people only consider circumstances within national borders. In an integrated Europe, citizens may know about and compare conditions across countries. Such comparisons may influence the way people think about, and respond to, childrearing costs. To explore this possibility and its implications, we present evidence from 44 in-depth interviews with Polish parents in the UK and Poland. Explanations of childbearing decisions involve comparisons of policy packages and living standards across countries. Individuals in Poland used richer European countries as an important reference point, rather than the (recent) Polish past. In contrast, migrants often positively assessed their relatively disadvantaged circumstances by using Polish setting as a reference. The findings could help explain why, despite substantial policy efforts, fertility has remained at very low levels in low-fertility, poorer European countries, while migrants from those countries often have higher fertility abroad.

Keywords: low fertility, policy and fertility, fertility in Europe, fertility in Central and Eastern Europe, migrants' fertility, fertility decisions, low-fertility trap, Polish migrants

Introduction

In the early 1990s period fertility rates across much of Southern and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) fell to very low levels, and total fertility rates (TFR) have remained low ever since. Reversing low fertility is a prominent policy issue for most of these countries because of concerns about the social and economic impact of accelerated population aging (Kohler et al., 2006, Bloom et al., 2010). Using evidence that desired fertility exceeds actual fertility in many low-fertility countries to frame the policy problem, the European Union (EU) has promoted a policy agenda to reduce the costs of childbearing (European Commission, 2006a, Frejka et al., 2008, Davies, 2013). This policy logic represents a straightforward application of cost-benefit models of fertility decision-making: ‘if appropriate mechanisms existed to allow couples to have the number of children they want, the fertility rate could rise...’ (European Commission, 2005, p. 5). Despite considerable policy efforts, TFRs remain very low in some parts of Europe. In CEE, where mean ideal and desired fertility remains at around 2 children (Testa, 2012, Sobotka and Beaujouan, 2014), period fertility is nearly 30 percent below replacement level; likewise, cohort fertility is predicted to remain well below replacement (Basten and Frejka, 2015).

Researchers have offered several explanations for why individuals appear to want to have (more) children but fail to respond to policies that should be enabling. Some have questioned whether the difference between desired and actual fertility – often referred to as the *fertility gap* – is a valid measure of frustrated desires (Lutz, 2007, Philipov et al., 2009). Others have suggested that the level of support provided, while improved, is not substantial enough to motivate behavioral change (Hoem, 2008, Basten and Frejka, 2015), or that the effect of policy interventions could be moderated or nullified by the wider institutional context,

especially when examples of “best practice” are imported from very different institutional settings (Sigle, 2016). While these explanations are plausible and compelling, we propose an additional explanation, one which involves a reassessment of the way fertility decisions are conceptualized in modern, interconnected societies. In contemporary Europe, where the movement of information and people has, for many years, been largely unobstructed, it is likely that individuals are aware of circumstances across borders, and compare their conditions to elsewhere (Delhey and Kohler, 2006, Fahey, 2010). This information may influence how people evaluate and respond to “family friendly” policy interventions.

If people living in poorer European nations compare their living conditions to what is attainable in wealthier Member States, their aspirations and perceived costs of providing adequately for children may, in recent years, have increased faster than average incomes. Consequently, a growing share of prospective parents may have concluded that they cannot afford to have (more) children, even as their absolute incomes were rising. Additionally, if family and friends who have migrated are perceived to have better standards of living abroad, non-migrants may feel relatively deprived, even as their objective circumstances improve. Some people may decide that they cannot afford to have (more) children unless and until they migrate themselves. Similarly, those who have migrated may be motivated to continue living in the destination country once they become parents if they conclude that the conditions for raising children are better than in their country of origin. The selective emigration and non-return of individuals who are more inclined to have larger families could remove those families most likely to respond to enabling family policy innovations. Taken together, cross-national comparisons and the perceptions of relative deprivation and relative advantage they evoke could have diminished the enabling effects of new and improved family policy measures that have, in recent years, been implemented in low-fertility, poorer EU nations.

To explore whether and how cross-national comparisons inform decisions about childbearing in contemporary Europe, we focus on Polish nationals living in Poland and in the UK. Poland's TFR has remained at a very low level (around 1.3 children) despite numerous family-friendly policies introduced since the mid-2000s. Poland has experienced unprecedented levels of emigration in the last decade, and the TFR of Polish migrants in the UK (2.1 children) is higher than the TFR in Poland, and higher than the TFR of UK born women (1.8) (Dormon, 2014). By analyzing the accounts of individuals living in the two settings, we explore how Polish nationals living in Poland and the UK use cross-national comparisons when explaining whether or not they intend to have a second child. Respondents in both settings compared their living standard and policy packages to what could be obtained elsewhere. Individuals in Poland deemed their conditions inadequate compared to wealthier EU countries, whereas Polish migrants expressed relative satisfaction from their situation in the destination country comparing it to Poland. Our findings shed light on reasons behind higher fertility rates of migrants from low-fertility region, and contribute to wider debates around how fertility decision-making processes are conceptualized in modern, increasingly interconnected societies.

Background

Against a backdrop of concerns about the consequences of low fertility, evidence that people are not having the number of children they desire has attracted much attention across the EU. Motivated by arguments that family-friendly policies have sustained fertility at more manageable levels in some parts of Europe, e.g. France or Scandinavia (Bjorklund, 2006, Toulemon et al., 2008, Rindfuss et al., 2010, Thévenon and Neyer, 2014), policymakers in

lower fertility countries have sought to narrow the fertility gap by implementing policies that reduce the direct and indirect costs of childbearing (Philipov, 2009, Davies, 2013, United Nations, 2013). Despite extensive policy efforts, actual fertility rates have persisted at very low levels in many of the very low-fertility, CEE countries (Perelli-Harris, 2008, Stropnik and Sircelj, 2008, Basten and Frejka, 2015).

It is unclear why policy packages that should narrow fertility gaps have been less successful in some European countries than others. The low-fertility trap hypothesis suggests that very low fertility may, over time, become self-reinforcing and difficult to reverse. Previous research has described three explanatory processes. First, fewer potential mothers will result in fewer births; second, ideal family size might decline over time as small and/or childless families become the norm. Third, an economic explanation posits that as material aspirations increase and expected income declines (partly due to aging populations and its economic consequences), younger cohorts will decide they can afford to have fewer children (Lutz et al., 2006). According to the economic explanation, it is income relative to aspirations, rather than absolute income, that matters for fertility. Drawing on insights from the migration literature (Stark and Bloom, 1985, Stark and Yitzhaki, 1988, Massey, 1999), we suggest a further factor which could extend the economic explanation of a low-fertility trap in less affluent EU Member States: cross-national comparisons.

Policymakers and scholars have often presumed that individuals consider factors solely within their country of residence when they make decisions about childbearing. Such conceptual models and their empirical elaborations (e.g. country-level fixed effects) predict that individuals living in very low-fertility, less affluent Member States will compare their current circumstances to those they have experienced in the recent past: they should assess

more generous, enabling policies positively, and respond accordingly. This logic fails to account for an increasingly mobile and integrated Europe. Where migration is easy and exchanges of ideas and concepts, media coverage and social networks transcend national borders (Bruter, 2005, Hurrelmann, 2011), individuals are likely to be aware of, and take into consideration, policies and circumstances across borders. Research has shown that Europeans increasingly compare economic conditions in their country of residence to that of other EU Members, and use such comparisons to evaluate their own circumstances. For EU citizens, the relevant “reference groups” – the groups against which people compare themselves - have become increasingly pan-European (Delhey and Kohler, 2006, Fahey, 2010, Goedeme and Rottiers, 2011). As people become more aware of conditions abroad, individuals living in settings with high levels of out-migration may feel relatively deprived if they begin to compare themselves with international migrants or with the people living in countries where they, as migrants, could choose to settle. Consequently, non-migrants might feel increasingly worse off even as their circumstances are improving.

If people living in low-fertility, poorer Member States compare their circumstances to those of their counterparts living in wealthier European countries, this may contribute to a low-fertility trap for four reasons. Firstly, individuals’ expectations might converge towards living standards in a pan-European context. In low-income EU countries, as individuals adopt a more pan-European perspective, aspirations and perceived costs of childbearing may increase faster than their incomes. Consequently, people may decide that they cannot afford to have (more) children, even as their circumstances improve. Secondly, (prospective) parents may perceive themselves as having to compete with other European parents, including family and friends who migrated. Notions of what constitutes a decent standard of living and of what good parents need to provide for their children might be shaped by exposure to norms in

other, richer countries. This could produce pressures to have fewer children. Thirdly, if parents believe that their children will need eventually to compete in the European labor market, this may create further incentives to limit the number of children, and invest more heavily per child. Finally, planned or possible migration might create incentives to postpone childbearing in sending countries. Even if their initial migration plans were not long-term and did not involve childbearing (Nowicka, 2014, White, 2016) cross-national comparisons may encourage migrants from low-fertility, poorer EU countries to have children in the destination country and, eventually, to remain. Once they have settled, international migrants might feel better able to afford to have more children than if they returned home. If that is the case, preferences for larger families may be one of the characteristics that make migrants, especially those who remain for the longer term, a select group. Less affluent EU Members with very low fertility and high emigration of young people may see those people most likely to respond to enabling policies leaving the country and having their children abroad.

The dense migration network that has developed between the UK and Poland in recent years provides a unique opportunity to examine how cross-national comparisons shape the way that people think about childbearing and respond (or not) to changing policies. Poland's accession to the EU in 2004 opened up new opportunities for Polish citizens to pursue Western European standards of living whether in Poland or through migration (Galbraith, 2003, Mroz, 2010). However, all but three pre-2004 EU countries, Ireland, Sweden and the UK, restricted migration for several years after accession. The UK was quickly established as, and remains today, the main destination country for Polish migrants (Lesińska et al., 2014), making it a particularly good setting to explore comparisons and reference groups of a fairly large and fairly representative group of international migrants.

The Polish context allows us to explore whether individuals consider circumstances in other countries when they explain their childbearing decisions, even when they are not actively seeking to migrate, but live in a highly migratory culture. With the fall of socialism, Poland experienced a radical retrenchment of family policies accompanied by a sharp and persistent decline in the TFR (Pascall and Kwak, 2005). From the mid-2000s, Poland has extended paid maternity, parental and paternity leaves several times, expanded childcare services and significantly increased financial transfers to families with children. Despite these changes, fertility rates have not increased. Scholars have often argued that financial resources and policy support for families, although improved, are insufficient to effect a change in behaviour (Baranowska, 2007, Kotowska et al., 2008, Matysiak and Vignoli, 2016). Persistent low fertility in Poland has been attributed mainly to the financial and institutional obstacles people face in coping with family responsibilities, such as difficulties in attaining sufficient financial resources to support a family, low wages, unemployment, work-family reconciliation problems particularly for women and insufficient childcare support (Baranowska, 2007, Kotowska et al., 2008, Mishtal, 2009, Mynarska, 2009, Matysiak, 2011, Czapinski, 2013, Matysiak and Vignoli, 2016). Although scholars mention that ideational processes related to the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), such as secularization and individualization, are gradually gaining importance, such ideational transformation is reported to be rather slow (Kurek, 2011, Mynarska et al., 2014). Some scholars have noted that increasing aspirations for better living standards, particularly after the country's EU accession, may have played a role in low-fertility trends in Poland (Czapinski, 2013, Matysiak and Vignoli, 2016). While Poland has experienced unprecedented economic growth in the last decade, the country still lags behind the EU-15 Members (European Commission, 2012, European Commission, 2015, Eurostat, 2015). The few studies which examine the fertility of Polish migrants in the UK document their lower TFR relative to other major

migrant groups and to some other Eastern European nationals in England (for a review of international migrant fertility see, for example, Kulu and González-Ferrer, 2014, Wilson, 2015). Nonetheless, Poles living in the UK appear to have higher fertility than those who remain (or returned) to Poland, although their initial migration was found to be unrelated to family formation (Dormon, 2014, Waller et al., 2014, Robards and Berrington, 2015, Robards and Berrington, 2016). In this paper, we use the findings from in-depth interviews with Polish nationals living in both locations to help us understand the reasons behind this differential.

Research questions

This article investigates whether and how cross-national comparisons could shed light on the persistence of very low fertility in poorer European countries, and aims to answer two linked research questions:

1. How do Polish born individuals use cross-national comparisons to explain their childbearing decisions?
2. Are there differences in cross-national comparisons made by Polish nationals living abroad and those residing in Poland?

Research design and methodology

The analyses draw on face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews (n=44) conducted with Polish fathers and mothers with one child living in Krakow and London in 2011. We focused on people who were already parents, because low fertility in Poland appears to be driven not by childlessness but by small families as most Poles still have at least one child (Kotowska et al., 2008, Tymicki, 2009, van Bavel and Rozanska, 2009). Moreover, parents

may be more aware of the opportunities and constraints of childrearing relative to childless people (Dommermuth et al., 2011).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews

The interviews were conducted as part of a larger project which collected information about the fertility intentions of Polish fathers and mothers living in the UK and Poland, focusing specifically on second births (Marczak, 2013). The findings presented here were not the focus of the study: we made no effort to prompt people to consider how cross-national comparisons inform their fertility intentions, however the topic was followed up if it was brought up spontaneously by respondents. Interviews began with general questions about respondents' families and places of origin, housing and employment backgrounds. Informants in London were asked questions about their reasons for coming to the UK, and what they have been doing since arrival. Respondents were asked about their experiences with their first child, whether they intended to have any more children and under what circumstances they might decide to have another child. Informants were asked specifically about government and family support available to them (for more detailed description of research instruments see - Marczak 2013). Leading or closed response type questions were avoided, so that the content of the interviews was determined by respondents. Follow-up questions were used to clarify and elaborate responses, and, at the end of the interview, respondents were asked if they wanted to add any information to ensure that we did not overlook any issues that were important to them.

Solicited accounts gathered during interviews are not expected to provide unbiased data as all accounts are social phenomena ‘occurring in, and shaped by, particular contexts’ and through interaction with the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007 p.120). The interviewer’s characteristics (childless, female, university-educated, Polish migrant in the UK pursuing a PhD) might have triggered informants to deploy specific responses; another researcher might have elicited different narratives. Even so, qualitative interviews allowed more time for informants to present and explain the rationales for their fertility intentions. Interviews provide detailed information about the complex, varied and sometimes contradictory rationales that people draw on when they think about childbearing (Buber and Fliegenschnee, 2011, Bernardi et al., 2012), that cannot be gathered through quantitative surveys.

Sample selection and fieldwork

Interviews were conducted in Polish by the first author, a native Polish speaker. Data were collected until a point of saturation was reached, and no new information was provided (Kvale, 1996, 2008). The final sample includes 44 individuals: 13 mothers and 9 fathers in London, 11 mothers and 11 fathers in Krakow (see Table 1 for respondents’ characteristics).

Table 1

Since ‘there are a limited number of interpretations or versions of reality’ (Gaskell, 2000, p. 43), this number of respondents allowed us to capture a range of views, opinions and beliefs underpinning fertility intentions. The literature suggests that educational level and employment status are important determinants of fertility decisions, so we sampled individuals who varied in these characteristics to explore themes that are unique for a particular group (Patton, 2002). Because we were interested in comparing themes that emerged among interviewees in Poland and the UK, we ensured that a similar number of

individuals with certain characteristics (e.g. similar educational status) were interviewed in both cities. Respondents were recruited purposively through advertisements in local newspapers, online fora and in Polish shops and churches in London. To ensure that interviewees were relatively established, and that they had time to familiarize themselves with the cultural, social and economic environment of the UK we only recruited migrants who had lived in the UK for at least 2 years. Although the sampling strategy in Poland did not take past or future migration plans into consideration, during interviews in Krakow, it emerged that several respondents had personal migration experiences and others were actively searching for employment abroad. This reflects the widespread short- and long-term migration, and migratory culture that has developed within Poland in recent years. It is important to stress that the sample is varied but not statistically representative; we are not able to assess the prevalence of specific views or experiences. The main purpose of the interviews was to generate a range of justifications and beliefs related to childbearing intentions and to obtain rich data for a fuller and deeper understanding of individuals' decision-making processes.

Interviews were conducted in Krakow and London in 2011 in settings of respondents' choosing (coffee shops, restaurants, libraries, parks, home). Prior to fieldwork, the Research Ethics Review Checklist and Ethics Review Questionnaire for Researchers was completed in accordance with the Research Ethics Committee's requirements at London School of Economics and Political Science. Informed consent to participate and to record the interviews was obtained from all respondents prior to interview. Respondents were provided information verbally and in writing about the obligations of the researcher and interviewees' rights, and given an opportunity to ask questions before signing the consent form. To ensure anonymity, respondents' names and indirect identifiers have been removed, and pseudonyms are used in the material that follows.

Analysis

NVivo 8 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2008) was used to index the text into themes, facilitate code retrieval and link research remarks to coding (Kelle, 2000). Thematic analysis was used to organize the data by focusing on the identification and reporting of patterns and themes. Coded data were used to develop themes, identify patterns in the data, to aid description, organization and interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998, Braun and Clarke, 2006). Codes that did not fit preliminary themes were reviewed, leading to the generation of new themes. Preliminary themes were checked by returning to the coded data to identify patterns. The final analytic stage involved comparison between the four groups (mothers and fathers) living in Poland and in the UK) to identify any group-level patterns. Care has been taken to draw on evidence from a wide range of interviews to avoid overemphasis on a few participants. The collection, transcription and analyses were conducted in Polish. Translation, by the lead author, was only done in the final stage of writing up to minimise any distortions in analysis related to the loss of nuance, concepts and meanings in translation.

Findings

The interviews allowed us to explore whether and how cross-national comparisons are used by respondents to rationalize and explain their childbearing intentions. When asked whether they intended to have another child, informants in both Krakow and London spontaneously described differences in living standards, family policy packages and in the costs of childrearing across European nations. Most salient in their narratives was the issue of the costs of raising children, and how to secure a satisfactory living standard, irrespective of whether living in Poland or the UK.

Cross-national comparisons in Krakow

Despite substantial improvements in economic circumstances in the years following accession to the EU, cross-national comparisons were linked to depictions of relative deprivation in Krakow. Conditions in Poland were evaluated using Western European standards of living (wages, material and housing conditions) as a benchmark, particularly when describing what parents need to provide for their children. Respondents used comparative economic assessments to explain why they had decided to delay or avoid having another child. Maria, for instance, wanted to make sure that her family income was higher before she had a second child, to ensure a better standard of living for her family:

Interviewer (I): Your husband also works?

Respondent (R): but the money is still not enough [to have a second child]... if every Pole earned twice as much as now it would be acceptable, if Poles earned three times as much we could afford to go somewhere on holidays, nothing special...wages are four times lower than anywhere abroad and this is a problem... I am full of admiration for people that for this money, with these prices, they decide to have children (Maria, 32, Krakow)

Individuals offered detailed, although sometimes exaggerated, accounts of disparities in living standards and policy contexts between different EU nations. Several respondents in Krakow had personal migration experiences, from summer jobs, studies, to working abroad for up to 10 years. Many informants, even if they did not have first-hand migration experience, had family members and friends living abroad. Through these contacts, they formed an idea of disparities in living standards between Poland and other European countries. Respondents in Poland repeatedly made comparisons to Germany, Austria, France, Ireland, Norway and the UK, and through such comparisons

parents conveyed dissatisfaction with their current living standards, indicating that it would be easier to maintain a decent standard of living and to provide for another child elsewhere. Rysiek, for instance, evaluated his financial situation and living costs in Poland in relation to his friend living abroad:

I: You said that both you and your wife have good jobs?

R: ...spending is equal to income and all income is gone immediately.

I have a friend in England, he brings me clothes from there, and the prices there, if shoes cost 200 zlotys [£42] here, then there he buys it for £15... So, life is simply easier there, isn't it? (Rysiek, 39, Krakow)

Similarly, Jakub had friends working in Austria and when he talked about his wife's job, he elaborated:

R: ...my wife earns 1400zlotys [£298, net earnings]...only in Poland it is like that, everywhere in the West they work half as much and they earn three times as much... (Jakub, 48, Krakow)

At the time of fieldwork the Gross Domestic Product per capita measured in Purchasing Power Parity for Poland was around half of that for Western and Northern European nations (Eurostat, 2015). Although economic decision-making theories often assume that individuals have unbiased information (Fjellman, 1976, Becker and Barro, 1988), informants however provided descriptions of better circumstances abroad that were overstated. Scholars have suggested that CEE citizens' idealized perceptions of luxurious Western standard of living set standards by which they evaluate their own living conditions, and shape their desires to partake in an imagined Western community (Fehervary, 2002). Participants in Poland would express extravagant idea of living conditions and wages abroad, which may be partly a consequence of exposure to Polish and Western media representations of how people live in

the West (Delhey and Kohler, 2006). It is also plausible that some migrants portray their living situation in a better light than the reality, to justify their migration decisions to residents in Poland, with the latter unable to verify these claims. This may generate idealistic perceptions of living standards elsewhere among residents in Poland, and may exacerbate feelings of deprivation when they consider their own circumstances. If that is the case, less affluent European governments might struggle to create contexts which would be perceived by their citizens as adequate to have (more) children.

Living standards were often reported to be much lower in Poland relative to Western European nations, childrearing costs were deemed high and state support for raising children inadequate, relative to support on offer elsewhere. Respondents' also referred to media coverage of cross-national disparities in living standards; for example, Danuta explained that governmental support for parents was insufficient in Poland:

R: ...social support is also surely too small; looking at other countries it is really bad...Even Great Britain, I know it from TV... I have a family in Germany and I can see that social support there is on a much higher level... they get benefits for kids...it was a lot of money...I read once...how the state helps young mothers in England. And from that I concluded that the [social] help must be very good there... (Danuta, 30, Krakow)

Polish media often compared living conditions and welfare support offered in Poland to other European countries. A series of articles argued that the generous welfare support in the UK, Ireland, Germany, France or Sweden, relative to the meagre support in Poland, made it much easier to have children abroad (Marczuk, 2010, Dzieci.pl, 2011, Jarek, 2011, Pszczółkowska, 2011b, Pszczółkowska, 2011a, Onet.pl, 2013). At the time of fieldwork similar articles appeared in national newspapers and online. Such

discourses can influence individuals' perceptions of reality and can become self-perpetuating and socially acceptable explanations of childbearing decisions (Marczak et al., 2015). Respondents in Krakow who compared Poland to other, richer countries, would describe themselves as relatively deprived, disregarding improvements in family-support and standard of living in Poland over the last decade. According to many respondents the Polish state, unlike governments abroad, provided parents with little, if any, assistance to raise children:

I: What do you think about social support for families?

R: ...in France a woman with, I think, three children gets a state pension... but well I think, what one can expect from this country [Poland]...it is useless. (Józef, 28, Krakow)

Parents in Krakow frequently appealed to Western European standards of living when they talked about having their desired number of children. Respondents argued that, to give each child good opportunities in the future in a European setting, it was necessary to spend a great deal of money on children's education and activities, to provide children with "Western" consumption goods (e.g.: branded clothing, PlayStation) and to finance their children's tertiary education. Some informants explained that they had decided not to have another child so that they could afford to provide their existing children in Poland with these goods and investments. For instance, Marta mentioned that despite desiring two offspring, she and her husband could only afford to provide adequately for one child:

R: ...these days speaking at least two languages fluently, this is the basics...English is the basics...

I: Does he [husband] share your opinion [to have one child]?

R: ...to support a child, provide this start for a child... to educate him... and to provide him with a flat...pay for English and other languages... well you need finances and with two children it would not be easy... (Marta, 29, Krakow)

Speaking English is enormously important in Poland 'as the modern lingua franca of the Western world and as a valuable asset in the national labour market' (Trevena, 2009b, p. 4). Parents stressed the high costs associated with providing for their children and ensuring their future economic success, often highlighting the need to purchase additional education, including private tuition in foreign languages.

Despite evidence of trends towards weakening of family ties in many European countries, scholars note that family alliances remain very strong in some settings (Reher, 1998, Micheli, 2004). Factors frequently associated with the SDT such as consumerism and increased aspirations related to the quality of life, combined with strong kinship alliances may translate into context-specific, SDT trends and sub-replacement fertility (Sobotka, 2008). Since children, parenthood and family are highly valued in contemporary Poland (Mynarska, 2009, CBOS, 2011a), Polish parents are determined to improve their families' material situation and living standard to reach (continually rising) Western European standards. Consequently, parents may choose to have fewer children than they might desire and invest more per child, to increase their children's life chances and maintain their family's standing in a pan-European setting. Such quality-quantity trade-off in childbearing decisions (Hodgson, 1983, Borgerhoff-Mulder, 1998, Basten, 2009), could explain the persistent gap between intentions and actual fertility in this context.

When respondents in Krakow compared policies and standard of living across countries, some considered moving abroad as an option to attain the desired living conditions and/or financial resources deemed necessary to have another child, particularly as migration was

relatively straightforward and acceptable. Selective emigration of individuals who are most inclined to have another child may further contribute to low fertility because people who are more likely to respond to family policies by having (more) children, may also be more inclined to move abroad. For instance, Michal explained that he was searching for a job abroad, in part, so that he could afford to have a second child:

I: ... you said that maybe you will have [second child] and maybe not?

R: It is related to finances all the time, if I earned more, then yes...I was thinking about going to Canada but it is too far away...Norway is the first choice for family migration [for Polish migrant families], [due to] its welfare conditions and wages... they are opening Austria's and Germany's [employment] markets... because there are no chances here. (Michal, 47, Krakow)

Ania's husband had applied for jobs abroad and she referred to healthcare, childcare provisions and social support for families in the potential destination country as reasons to consider moving abroad and to delay having more children until after they settled. Ania, who intended to have another child in near future, also mentioned that she would be able to give up employment upon migration to devote more time to children:

...if my husband gets a job abroad, there are good social provisions there, nurseries and kindergartens... when we migrate maybe I will be able to stay at home... I would like to commit some time for the kids... (Ania, 34, Krakow)

Prospects to spend more time with family and children upon migration (especially for mothers) were emphasized as an important consideration in decisions to move and settle

abroad for respondents in Krakow. The Polish labor market offers limited part-time work options and parents face high penalties for withdrawal from employment (Matysiak, 2011, Matysiak and Vignoli, 2016). The flexible labor market in the UK offers more opportunities for employment withdrawal and re-entry, and provides ample opportunities for part-time work, especially in low wage sectors (Sigle, 2016). Polish mothers who bear the bulk of the responsibility for child care (Matysiak, 2011, OECD, 2017), may find work-family-reconciliation easier to achieve when they have more opportunities to reduce temporarily their working hours in countries such as the UK. The ability to devote more time to family upon migration was indeed an appreciated factor for interviewees in London.

Cross-national comparisons in London

In London respondents who compared the standard of living and state support for families between Poland and the UK, expressed relative satisfaction with their living conditions. They explained that it was easier to provide their children with necessities because of lower costs of living relative to wages, and better state support for families with children:

I: So you always wanted to have two children?

R: I wanted to have two children whether here or in Poland, but here it is easier... In Poland, it is hard all the time. Here in general, the economy, shops, prices, wages, the government's help, if you take all that into consideration it is easier than in Poland... (Kinga, 28 London)

Within a national frame of reference, one could infer that migrants' low wages relative to the average wage in the UK (Drinkwater et al., 2009, Marczak, 2011) might negatively impact their perceptions about living costs and raising children. This however was not the case in our data, as informants compared their living conditions in London to what they thought would be

attainable in Poland. Informants in London highlighted that basic goods for children such as food, toys, clothes, equipment, toiletries or medication were cheaper in London relative to Poland:

... recently we bought a buggy, we paid £200...in Poland it would be half of my wage, here it is one tenth. (Felicjan, 24, London)

Relative to many EU-15 countries, the UK welfare state is often described as offering meagre support for families (Sigle, 2016), however, the Polish migrants we interviewed described it as very generous compared to Poland. Olga highlighted differences in state support between the two countries when she explained her firm intention to have another child:

...I suspect that if I lived in Poland, I would not decide for a [second] child because of financial reasons...in this country all benefits you get, cover costs [related to having children]...my partner does not earn much and they [government] add something [in benefits]...so this is a big help. This is incomparable to social allowances in Poland... (Olga, 32, London)

Respondents who did not rely on welfare benefits often noted that it was relatively easy to have a satisfactory standard of living on one income. For example, Mateusz explained that ‘it is easier here with one wage than in Poland with two wages’ and he reasoned that if his wife went to work she would ‘lose contact with children...then mistakes in their upbringing could happen...’. He was pleased that his wife could devote her time to raising their daughter and possibly more children. He felt it was easier to raise children in the UK as one partner could stay at home which was financially inconceivable in Poland. Although young, childless people have been the largest group of Polish migrants to the UK and their motivations to

migrate typically include employment opportunities, education and adventure (Trevena, 2009a, White, 2010), once they become parents, family-friendly conditions may play a role in decisions to continue living abroad. Ela came to London as a single individual seeking both adventure and educational opportunities, however, as a parent she valued the opportunity to be a full-time mother, which she thought would be impossible in Poland:

...Here I have this impression that I have it so well, I know that I do not work...I could not afford not to work in Poland and be able to support family on a satisfactory level. (Ela, 36, London)

Respondents emphasized the importance of housing conditions, suggesting that it is easier to accommodate a larger family in London than in Poland:

I: When you think about this second child, why do you intend to have it?

R: Simply, I can afford it, and I simply have housing conditions to have a second child... I have good conditions, because we have a two-bedroom flat, it is as if three bedrooms in Poland ... (Beata, 31 London)

With low incomes, Polish migrants often live in accommodation that, by UK standards, is overcrowded and poor quality (Robinson et al., 2007, Rolfe and Metcalf, 2009, McGhee et al., 2013). Informants, though, compared housing standards in London with those in Poland. Flats in Poland typically lack separate living rooms. Thus, a 2 bedroom flat in London was considered equivalent to a 3 bedroom flat in Poland. Beata, for example, explained that she could consider having another child in London because her accommodation would allow her to provide each child with a separate bedroom.

Respondents in London rarely compared themselves with UK nationals; they evaluated their situation abroad against Polish criteria, comparing themselves to their personal networks in

Poland (see also Stark and Taylor, 1989, Stark and Taylor, 1991). Many respondents kept close ties with Poland, facilitated by frequent Skype conversations, social networks (Nasza Klasa, Facebook) and Polish online media. Cheap flights made it possible to visit Poland frequently. Between 2000 and 2007 there was a twenty-fold increase in the number of passengers between the UK and Poland visiting friends or relatives (Civil Aviation Authority, 2009). Such visits, provide Polish migrants with regular and direct experiences of their home country, and their Polish-resident network members acquire information about life abroad. Respondents in London felt relatively advantaged (compared to Poland) after migrating, even if they were objectively disadvantaged in their new context. Such perceptions of relative advantage, if typical of migrants from other CEE countries, may help us to better understand reasons behind higher fertility levels of migrants from this region.

Discussion

In this paper, we have used qualitative interview data to illustrate how cross-national comparisons could help to explain persistence of very low-fertility in some of the poorer CEE countries and higher levels of fertility amongst emigrants from these countries who have settled in Western Europe. Despite rising living standards and increased support for families with children, Poland, alongside other very low-fertility CEE countries, has struggled to narrow its fertility gap. Informants in our study described what they considered to be necessary conditions for having more than one child with reference to (perceived) Western European standards. Our data suggest that cross-national comparisons shape the way people from poorer European countries evaluate living standards and childbearing costs. In some highly migratory contexts, individuals might not assess living standard and policy innovations as “improvements” relative to the past, but inadequate relative to what could be obtained

elsewhere. Consequently, fertility levels in CEE might remain stagnant at low levels, even as the costs of childbearing, relative to countries' recent past, are declining.

The effects of cross-national comparisons on aspirations could contribute to what scholars have described as a low-fertility trap (Lutz et al., 2006) by normalizing small families with high levels of material investments in children: good parents must provide their children with Western European living standards and one way to do that is to limit the number of children. This may be particularly true in settings where, as our data illustrated, (prospective) parents perceive themselves as having to compete with other Europeans, including family members and friends living abroad, to provide their children with perceived necessities. Low fertility rates may thus persist where it is considered essential to invest extensively in fewer children, rather than to have more children with less investment per child, because a smaller family makes it easier to catch up with, and maintain Western living standards, and to increase a child's life prospects in the competitive European context (Borgerhoff-Mulder, 1998, Dalla Zuanna, 2001).

The EU is committed to improvements in living conditions, economic growth and family-friendly policies in its newest Member States, often drawing attention to differentials and best practice. When individuals in new Member States compare living standards and policies across the whole of the EU, their expectations regarding necessary conditions to have children may outpace improvements in their circumstances. Persistently higher living standards in some of the richer EU countries may result in increased expectations in some of the poorer, very low fertility countries, which could contribute to the development of a low fertility trap. Some individuals may view migration as an option to achieve resources seen as necessary to have (more) children, leading to selective emigration of people who are particularly family oriented. Childless people, initially migrating for employment or other reasons, may also consider family-friendly conditions while deciding whether to continue

living abroad when they become parents. Poorer EU Members attempting to increase their low fertility rates or otherwise deal with the challenges of ageing populations, may thus see people of childbearing ages settling and having children abroad.

Although our empirical findings focus on Polish nationals, our research may have broader implications for how fertility decisions are conceptualized, particularly in the EU context. A growing literature highlights the importance of cross-national groups of references within Europe in assessments of living standard and relative poverty (Fahey and Smyth, 2004, Delhey and Kohler, 2006, Goedeme and Rottiers, 2011). Although “Brexit” is likely to pose restrictions on migration between the UK and EU, the ease of travel within Europe permits relatively easy relocation for leisure, visiting relatives, and employment for EU citizens. Importantly, European integration has brought unprecedented opportunities for cross-border exchanges of social, political, cultural and economic ideas and practices, and such exchanges are further enhanced by modern technology, social media and international news, serving to reinforce cross-national comparisons. Our findings could also contribute to how scholars think about why people migrate. Economic models of migration tend to have a narrow focus on wage differentials and employment conditions, and they tend to disregard that people may compare a broader set of factors related to living standards and flexible employment opportunities (for mothers especially) across nations in their migration decisions (Lee, 1966, Borjas, 1989, Massey, 1999).

Although our findings raise some intriguing questions around future fertility trends and prospects, this study has a number of limitations which highlight areas for further research. Our cross-sectional study design means that we do not know whether differences in childbearing rationales, attitudes and preferences of Polish migrants in London, relative to individuals in Krakow, were present prior to migration, or were a consequence of adaptation

(Milewski, 2007). It is not clear whether intentions to have more children that were described among Poles living in the UK can be attributed to selective migration (of people who already know they prefer larger families and particular gendered divisions of labour before they left Poland), adaptation (so that migrants exposed to the UK system decide to adopt UK family and gendered employment patterns), or a combination of both. Longitudinal research is needed to understand how selection and adaptation processes contribute to observed differences in fertility behavior in Poland and abroad. Education has been found to be an important variable in childbearing decisions (van Bavel and Rozanska, 2009). The broad educational distribution within each country sample however meant that we only had a small number of individuals in each educational category and thus were unable to explore in-depth those with a particular level of (high or low) education. How educational attainment shapes migration and fertility intentions as well as cross-national comparisons could be explored in future research. Moreover, our study focused on intentions rather than actual behavior. Because individuals do not always pursue a rational and openly intentional childbearing behaviour in a clear, planned and straightforward manner (Harris and Campbell, 1999, Gribaldo et al., 2009), more research is needed to examine whether and how cross-national comparisons inform not just childbearing intentions but subsequent behavior. Finally, the face-to-face interviews could have prompted respondents to say what they believed was the socially preferred response, whether it was carefully considered or not (Lincoln et al., 2000). In Poland where comparisons to Western Europe pervade many political, economic and media debates (CBOS, 2011b, Pszczółkowska, 2011b, O'Brennan, 2012, Onet.pl, 2013), cross-national comparisons could offer a “sensible” and “common-sense” explanation. Although in-depth interviews allowed us to explore some of the nuances related to childbearing intentions, dominant discourses may provide convenient and socially acceptable rationales which deflect efforts to encourage a deeper exploration of intentions and

motivations. Surveys with many questions and closed response categories may also elicit convenient and socially acceptable answers, however other methods where social desirability is less of a concern, could be explored; for example, an analysis of online discussion board exchanges.

Despite these limitations, our findings strongly suggest that the way demographers and policymakers conceptualize childbearing decision-making processes in contemporary, interconnected societies could be usefully revised. Efforts to understand the role of cross-national comparisons in childbearing decisions would not just enrich theory, with a better understanding of current trends and evidence, policymakers will be better placed to escape or avoid low fertility traps.

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Appendix 1 Overview of recent changes in family policies in Poland

After the collapse of Communism in 1989, neoliberal reforms and the emphasis on budgetary cuts forced post socialist states to withdraw a lot of social provisions while caring responsibilities were transferred to families as a saving mechanism. For example, replacement levels for maternity leave decreased, while parental allowances became available only for the poorest. The state childcare places were drastically reduced: in 1990s the number of kindergartens and nurseries was reduced by around 33 and 66 percent respectively. Holidays for children and after school clubs, which were heavily subsidised during socialism, were either closed or became much more expensive. Moreover, the majority of family benefits changed from universal to means-tested and more restrictive eligibility criterion was implemented to assist families with the lowest incomes. The necessity to cut spending on social benefits was also achieved through the “freezing” of payments while the inflation, especially in the initial years of transition, was very high across the region (Pascall and Manning, 2000, Balcerzak-Paradowska, 2003, European Commission, 2006b). After more than a decade of cutbacks of family provisions, in mid-2000 Poland started to introduce more generous family policies. For example, to address the acute shortage of formal childcare provisions, in 2011 Polish Parliament passed the Nursery Law to simplify the legal regulations for opening of nurseries, and in 2014 the government announced a new

programme devoting a set amount of financial resources for creating new childcare places. In 2010, around 2.6% of children under the age of 4 were attending nurseries which increased to 7.1% in 2014. From 2010/11 the compulsory school/reception age changed from 6 to 5 (previously children were legally obliged to attend reception following their 6th birthday), which addressed some of the shortages of kindergartens in Poland (based on www.przedszkola.edu.pl; www.stat.gov.pl; www.zlobki.mpips.gov.pl; www.men.gov.pl, accessed on 02/01/2016). The maternity leave was also increased: before 2010 women were entitled to 18 weeks of maternity at first birth and 20 weeks for each subsequent one, this was paid at 100% wage based on average annual income for the whole period. From 2010, this increased to 20 weeks after the first birth, with an additional 2 weeks for every consecutive child up to a maximum of 37 weeks. Paid at 100% wage based on an average annual income for the whole period. From September 2013, the leave was extended to a maximum of 12 months. Mothers can now take 6 months of maternity leave paid at full wage, after which parents (either mother or father) are entitled to another 6 months of leave at 60% of wage replacement; alternatively, women can take a 12 month leave at 80% of wage replacement (based on www.mpips.gov.pl, accessed on 13-19/02/2013). Up to 36 months of additional parental leave can be taken until the child is 5 years old (4 years old before 2013), it is usually unpaid, people on low income can receive a flat statutory monthly pay for 24 months. Parents who are not entitled to maternity/paid parental leaves (e.g. students, the unemployed) are entitled to receive monthly amount of 1000 zlotys of birth-grant for 12 months. One week of paternity leave paid at 100% wage replacement was introduced in 2010 and extended to 2 weeks in 2012. In 2006, the government introduced a universal birth grant: a one-off payment of 1000 zlotys (families on low income can qualify for a double amount). From 2016 parents are entitled to a universal cash benefit of 500 zlotys for a second and each consecutive child, until the child is 18 years old; only parents on low income are entitled to the cash benefit of

500 zlotys for the first child. Additional means-tested child benefit is paid for each child, the amount varies from 95 to 135 zlotys per child depending on the child's age ([based on www.mpips.gov.pl](http://www.mpips.gov.pl), accessed on 02/01/2016). A universal tax relief for families with children was introduced in 2007 in Poland; the maximum deductible annual amount for each child has remained at 1112 zlotys until 2016. In 2014, the government increased the maximum deductible amount for 3rd and consecutive children and from 2015 the tax relief for families with 3 and more children can be deducted not only from the tax paid but also from national/health insurance paid (based on www.mf.gov.pl accessed on 02/01/2016).

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Table 1. Respondents' characteristics

		London	Krakow
Gender	Male	9	11
	Female	13	11
Age group	20-29	7	9
	30-39	15	11
	40-49	0	2
Highest completed education	Tertiary (Bachelor, Master, PhD)	10	11
	Secondary (A levels)	7	6
	Vocational	5	5

Employment status	Full time	9	15
	Part time	5	4
	Unemployed	2	2
	Economically inactive	6	1
Relationship status	Married	14	21
	Cohabiting	8	1
Age of first child	<1 year	3	5
	1-3 years	9	11
	> 3-5 years	6	2
	> 5 years	4	4
Year of arrival in the UK	2000-2003	6	-
	2005-2006	9	-
	2007-2008	7	-
Marital status and presence of children upon arrival to the UK	Single, no children	8	
	Partnered/married, no children	9	
	Partnered/married, one child	5	

